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Horror Crime or Bad Habit? Blasphemy in Premodern Europe, 1200–1650

In public debates the issue of blasphemy is often marked as a modern phenomenon. In fact, blasphemous speech acts were also an integral part of everyday life in the Middle Ages and in Early Modern Europe. Cursing and swearing, oaths and other blasphemous utterances were used in all strata of society. While enraged preachers condemned this mortal sin and various laws threatened with capital punishment, the common practice was different as most blasphemies passed with minor punishments or even without any kind of prosecution. Attacks on the honour of God were constituent elements of everyday conflict behaviour. Blasphemy therefore must not be misinterpreted as indication of religious indifference or even unbelief, but rather as different usage of the religious sphere in premodern times.

1. Introduction

In recent years the issue of blasphemy has aroused the attention of the public throughout the world. One of the most obvious recent examples is that of the Muslim demonstrators who protested violently against the alleged “derision of the prophet” when a Danish newspaper published caricatures of Muhammad in February 2006. In February 1989, Ayatollah Khomeini had already demanded the death of author Salman Rushdie for his supposedly blasphemous novel the “Satanic Verses.” It is not the purpose of this article to discuss whether these protests should really be seen as the consequences of a “clash of civilisation” between the Orient and the Occident, but the debate in the Western media is not simply about the realization of differences between cultures — it is also fundamentally about the construction of our own past, too.

Simply put, in the recent debates about the “clash of civilisation” there are two points of view that are diametrically opposed to each other. On the one hand there are those who stand against the derision of the sacred in Western culture, even though the “exaggerated and violent reaction of the Muslims” is rejected. Making fun of Christian symbols like the crown of thorns or the cross has — as the German journalist Peter Hahne pointed out — “nothing to

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do with freedom of speech, it is brazen blasphemy.”¹ Christian voices had already commented on the “Satanic Verses” in a similar vein.² A lack of respect for religion and the breaking of taboos are seen as inevitably resulting in the spectre of cultural decline. Authors like Hahne regard blasphemy as a symptom of the decadence of modern Western culture. On the other hand, there are the enthusiastic adherents of the freedom of speech. They see blasphemy or at least the liberty to utter blasphemy as an expression of rationality and a clear consequence of enlightenment thought. These philosophical movements had unleashed the power of derision against the sacred, whereas the Muslim world has yet to witness the dawn of what westerners would consider enlightenment thought. Whether blasphemy is a sign of decadence or a proof of secular critical thinking, it is at the core of Western self-interpretation.

Thus, the historian of early modern Europe sees herself obliged to test the validity of these opposing concepts. We can base such a test on a whole range of research.³ Some of the relevant publications, however, present not only important facts and interesting reflections but also some questionable interpretations. The American constitutional historian, Leonard W. Levy, in his book first printed in 1981 and republished in a new substantially enlarged edition in 1993, was responsible for some erroneous statements. For example, he claimed that the crime of blasphemy as such had not existed in the Middle Ages, since all blasphemy had been regarded as heresy.⁴ An important step forward in the development of that field of research was the survey by Alan Cabantous which was based on numerous unpublished works by his students.⁵ While his publication concentrated on the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries exclusively, it ignored some important parts of earlier historical development. In my own research I have tried to reveal some main features of the perception and the social practice of blasphemy in the late Middle Ages and the

1. “Bild am Sonntag,” 5 February 2006.

2. Lisa Appignanesi and Sarah Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File* (London: Fourth Estate, 1989), 70, 124.

3. Peter Burke, “Insult and Blasphemy in Early Modern Italy,” in *The Historical Anthropology of Early Modern Italy: Essays on Perception and Communication* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 95–109; in Jean Delumeau, ed., *Injures et Blasphèmes*, présenté par (Paris: Imago, 1989); Heinrich R. Schmidt, “Die Ächtung des Fluchens durch reformierte Sittengerichte,” in Peter Blickle, ed., *Der Fluch und der Eid. Die metaphysische Begründung gesellschaftlichen Zusammenlebens und politischer Ordnung in der ständischen Gesellschaft* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1993), 65–120; Francisca Loetz, *Mit Gott handeln. Von den Zürcher Gotteslästerern der Frühen Neuzeit zu einer Kulturgeschichte des Religiösen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002).

4. Leonard W. Levy, *Treason against God. A History of the Offence of Blasphemy* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1981). Leonard W. Levy, *Blasphemy. Verbal Offense against the Sacred, from Moses to Salman Rushdie* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1993). Challenges to these views were raised by Edwin D. Craun, “‘Inordinata Locutio’: Blasphemy in Pastoral Literature, 1200–1500,” *Traditio* 39 (1983): 135–62, also by Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue. Discipline et éthique de la parole dans la culture médiévale Paris* (Paris: Cerf, 1991). Levy ignored these objections in his 1993 book, as did David Lawton, *Blasphemy* (New York, NY: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 84ff. See also Gauri Viswanathan, “Blasphemy and Heresy: The Modernist Challenge. A Review Article,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37 (1995): 399–412.

5. Alain Cabantous, *Histoire du blasphème en Occident, fin 16e — milieu 19e siècle* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1998).

early modern period.⁶ It is the purpose of this article to present some of my observations in a very abbreviated manner. It will be demonstrated that blasphemy is by no means a modern phenomenon. Rather, it is deeply rooted in Old-European culture and has its very own physiognomy.

2. A Christian Family Quarrel

“Blasphemy” has always been a label used to condemn and fight certain speech acts (and sometimes actions). The theologians and jurists of the thirteenth century would certainly have accepted the definition used today by Muslim protesters: “derision and mockery of the sacred.” The core of this use of the term was the insulting of God, the disrespect of God and his saints: *Blasphemare est contumeliam vel aliquod convitium inferre in iniuriam Creatoris*. (To blaspheme means to imply something shameful or something wrong to the detriment of the creator.)⁷ This label, however, was applied to numerous actions and to numerous actors. Mostly, the reports about blasphemy referred to calumnious words or insulting gestures. In addition to that, Western Christianity discussed the question of images in this context. The cult of images as well as iconoclasm could be regarded as blasphemy. Andreas Karlstadt, the early Wittenberg collaborator and later adversary of Luther’s, considered images in churches simply as idolatry and blasphemy. Evidently, this radical stance against images became dominant neither in Lutheran Protestantism nor in the majority of the other denominations. On the contrary, the radical iconoclasts who tried to destroy images of the sacred as idols were persecuted as blasphemers.⁸

Much as in the present, the Middle Ages and the early modern period used the accusation of blasphemy as a handy weapon against people of a different faith.⁹ Blasphemy played a central role in the conflict with the older sibling religion of Judaism with which Christianity shared some of its sacred texts. According to the gospels (Mt 26:63–66, Mc 14:61–63), Caiphas, tearing his robes, branded Jesus as a blasphemer as Jesus declared that he was the Messiah. In response to that, Christian theologians declared the infidelity of the Jews and their condemnation of the Lord an unheard of contemporary blasphemy still existing in the present. In his later days Luther summarised all the centuries-old attacks against “that blasphemous people” in his invectives against “the Jews and their lies.” The Jews allegedly called Jesus a wizard and

6. Summarised in Gerd Schwerhoff, *Zungen wie Schwerter. Blasphemie in alteuropäischen Gesellschaften 1200–1650* (Konstanz: UVK, 2005).

7. Alexander von Hales, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 3 (Ad Claras Aquas: Quaracchi, 1930), 464f. Cf. Craun, “Inordinata Locutio”; Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue*, 173ff; Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 21ff.

8. Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious idols and violent hands. Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 72ff, 197ff; Norbert Schnitzler, *Ikonoklasmus — Bildersturm. Theologischer Bilderstreit und ikonoklastisches Handeln während des 15. und 16. Jahrhunderts* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1996), 131ff; Olivier Christin, “L’iconoclaste et le blasphémateur au début du XVIe siècle”, in Delumeau, *Injures et Blasphemes*, 45.

9. Gerd Schwerhoff, “Blasphemie zwischen antijüdischem Stigma und transkultureller Praxis. Zum Vorwurf der Gotteslästerung gegen die Juden in Mittelalter und beginnender Neuzeit,” *Aschkenas* 10 (2000): 117–55.

did dishonour to his name by spitting on the ground three times [when they pronounced it], they called him the son of a whore and a rightly executed robber.¹⁰ They allegedly called Mary a whore and damned all Christians. In that way, the accusation of blasphemy became part and parcel of anti-Jewish stereotypes like the profanation of the eucharist and the alleged ritual murder of Christian children. These stereotypes contributed to a false image of Judaism that instigated and justified the discrimination, the expulsion of Jewish communities and the deadly pogroms of the fourteenth century.

It is even more surprising, that many theologians presented people of a different faith as role models, centring upon their heightened horror of sacrilegious behaviour. From Jacques de Vitry in ca. 1200 through to the Protestant preachers of the seventeenth century, Christian sermons and exemplary tales described Jews (sometimes also pagans and Muslims) as very sensitive concerning the derision of the name of God. In contrast to that, Christians used the name of the creator profligately and frequently blasphemed against it.¹¹ Of course, preachers here are far from approving or, indeed accepting of the foreign religions in their midst or beyond. In reality, they tried to show their Christian audience quite drastically the abject horrors that lay within the deep rooted habit of blasphemy. So the conflict with blasphemers before the age of the Enlightenment was not, in the first place between religions but took place within Christianity itself. Blasphemy was a kind of Christian family quarrel.

It is important to differentiate between heresy as essentially false doctrine and blasphemy as evil, insulting utterances.¹² Of course, heretics and later on denominational adversaries were often denounced as blasphemers. This was quite commonplace since competing opinions about the true Christian faith were often consciously given an abrasive form. When the heretical Cathars of the thirteenth century scoffed that the people who had taken communion through the centuries should have eaten all of the body of Christ by now, even if it had been as big as the Alps, in the eyes of the Church of Rome they self-evidently blasphemed.¹³ Ecclesiastical and state authorities could use explicit accusations of blasphemy when they found it hard to bring any other concrete charges against individuals and groups. For example, blasphemy was one element of the accusation against Joan of Arc in 1431 and against the anti-trinitarian Michel Servetus whom Calvin had put to the stake in Geneva in 1553. Luther and his collaborators condemned the rejection of the infant baptism, the oath, and the whole of the ecclesiastical hierarchy as blasphemy that should be punished severely, including capital punishment.¹⁴

10. Martin Luther, "Von den Juden und ihren Lügen" (1543), in *Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Weimarer Ausgabe), vol. 53 (Weimar: Böhlau, 1920), 511–22.

11. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 111ff.

12. Cf. Levy, *Blasphemy*; Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 74ff.

13. Petrus de Vaux-de-Cernay, *Heresies of the High Middle Ages*. Selected sources translated and annotated by Walter L. Wakefield and Austin P. Evans (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1969), S.238f.

14. Hermann Pfister, *Die Entwicklung der Theologie Melancthons unter dem Einfluß der Auseinandersetzung mit Schwarmgeistern und Wiedertäufern* (Freiburg i. Br.: Deutsche Pax-Christi-Bewegung, 1968), 345ff.

3. Blasphemous Speeches and the Reactions of Justice

The typical Christian blasphemer was neither an intellectual dissident nor a member of a heretical sect. He was a person who spoke a coarse and ungodly language. Such persons could be found in all strata of society from destitute robbers to noble princes.¹⁵ Swearing and oaths were the blasphemous utterances par excellence. In late medieval and early modern everyday life, if somebody wished to corroborate a statement he often did so calling on the suffering, the wounds or some part of the body of Christ.¹⁶ Hardly any part of the body was left out; people swore by the head, by the lungs or by the foot of the Lord. At times, oaths even referred to sexual organs (“by God’s prick”) or to excrements. In a more or less drastic way, these oaths profaned one of the most marked characteristics of Christianity, the notion that God had assumed a material body. Other oaths considered blasphemous expressed the urgent wish that the devil might take someone or other or even the desire that the creator himself should get epilepsy. Apart from this stereotypical but extremely rich form of blasphemy there existed a whole number of unconventional and creative profanities. People parodied the Ten Commandments, they called the Mother of Christ a whore or insulted a saint with the “fig,” an indecent gesture.¹⁷ In the late fifteenth century, Thonis von Wesseling of Cologne allegedly ridiculed the Christian doctrine as a fairy tale for fools and the priests as the “Devil’s parsons.” Concerning the resurrection of the flesh on the Day of Judgement he said that he believed only in the daily erection.¹⁸ Some of the blasphemers accompanied their verbal with actual physical attacks with a knife, for example piercing an image of Jesus, Mary, or a saint. At times, even these representations were considered unnecessary. As a pamphlet printed 1553 in Strassbourg reported for the same year, somebody allegedly lost a lot of money at a shooting contest. He blasphemously swore that he wanted to knife God in Heaven. He threw a dagger into the sky that did apparently not come back; however, five drops of blood fell out of the sky. Obviously, the dagger had found its aim. Needless to say, the devil took the blasphemer immediately.¹⁹

Enraged preachers sometimes compared blasphemers to butchers who mutilated the body of Christ. The blasphemers, so the preachers complained, crucified Jesus Christ again with their tongues. Their arrows were considered the contemporary equivalents of the instruments used by the soldiers who had

15. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 255ff.

16. Gerd Schwerhoff, “Christus zerstückeln. Das Schwören bei den Gliedern Gottes und die spätmittelalterlicher Passionsfrömmigkeit,” in *Frömmigkeit im Mittelalter. Politisch-soziale Kontexte, visuelle Praxis, körperliche Ausdrucksformen*, ed. Klaus Schreiner (München: Oldenbourg, 2002), 499–527. Cf. also Ashley Montagu, *The Anatomy of Swearing* (New York, NY and London: Macmillan, 1967); Geoffrey Hughes, *Swearing. A Social History of Foul Language, Oaths and Profanity in English* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991).

17. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 236ff.

18. Gerd Schwerhoff, “Die alltägliche Auferstehung des Fleisches. Religiöser Spott und radikaler Unglaube um 1500,” *Historische Anthropologie* 12 (2004): 309–37.

19. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 58ff.

tortured Christ during the Passion.²⁰ Theological tracts and sermons are awash with such outspoken condemnations of blasphemers. Often, blasphemy is presented as the worst of all sins constituting a deadly sin that could hardly be erased by atonement since it was directed against the divine creator and thus against the highest majesty. It put the worldly as well as the ecclesiastical order into jeopardy. The preachers explained in many *exempla* how God himself — rather fastidiously — took revenge for insults on the body of the profaner by making tongues swell, by throwing lightning from the sky, or by executing the sinner in some other crude and gory way. According to the urgent request of the preachers, it was best if the urban or village community took it upon themselves to punish the blasphemers. If the neighbours did not denounce the profaners and if the authorities did not punish them, providential divine punishment would come over the whole of the Christian community. When emperor Maximilian passed the first imperial law against blasphemy in 1497, he did so expressly because of the fear of epidemics, hunger, and natural disasters. Maximilian explicitly referred to the *Codex Iustinianus* of 538 that had utilised similar arguments.²¹

The reference to a law code of late antiquity demonstrates that the legal battle against blasphemy has a long history. Of course, it could be extended back to the mosaic law (Lv 24) which ordered that a blasphemer should be stoned to death by the whole Jewish community. Many older publications postulated on the basis of these ancient rules a dubious continuity and assumed that blasphemy in the Judeo-Christian tradition was constantly considered as a capital crime. This assumption led to a failure to appreciate the historical teleology of the topic. Important turning points were thus rendered invisible. One of the most important turning points in the history of blasphemy came in the first half of the thirteenth century.²² Between 1227 and 1234 Pope Gregory IX decreed (c.2 X de maledicis V. 26) not only that blasphemers must undertake public penance in church but also that the secular authorities should make blasphemers pay stiff fines. In 1231, emperor Friedrich II in the constitutions of Melfi threatened that blasphemers would lose their tongues. The Law of the City of Vienna had called for a similar punishment ten years earlier. The fact that rules against blasphemy appeared in ecclesiastical as well as in imperial and in communal law roughly at the same time suggests that contemporaries had become more aware of the crime. Whereas monarchs like Louis IX of France (1214–70) and Alfonso X of Castile (1221–84) produced bans and sanctions against blasphemy in quick succession, in Italy and in the Empire the cities took the initiative. Already in the late Middle Ages laws against

20. Montagu, *Anatomy of Swearing*, 119ff; William H. Cannon, Jr., ed., “La Moralité des Blasphémateurs du Nom de Dieu”, [French Text with English Introduction and Notes] (Ph.D. University of Kansas, 1970); Andreas Musculus, “Der Fluchteufel (Von dem unchristlichen, erschrecklichen und grausamen fluchen und Gottslestern)” (1556), in *Teufelsbücher in Auswahl*, ed. Ria Stambaugh, vol. 4. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1978).

21. Deutsche Reichstagsakten unter Maximilian I., vol. 1.1, ed. Heinz Angermeier (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981), Nr. 458.

22. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 115ff. See for developments in the discourse of blasphemy, based on the pastoral literature, which shows also the importance of this period in blasphemy’s history. See Craun, “Inordinata Locutio”; Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue*.

blasphemy were part and parcel of the relevant collections of statutes. It is important to note that the Reformation did not bring any fundamental change here.

As the preachers had warned dramatically against the consequences of profanity, the laws themselves threatened draconian punishment: the pillory, exile, in severe cases even capital punishment. Had not God himself ordered a blasphemer to be stoned to death according to the story of the Old Testament (Lv 24)? Yet even in rigorously Reformed Zurich where there were more trials against blasphemers than anywhere else in Central Europe, this crime accounted for only a small percentage of the overall crime figure. Most convictions did not result in the use of the more severe punishments. Whilst fines were customary, only hardened profaners would be made into examples for the full severity of the law.²³ Zealous preachers did not merely worry about the apparent leniency of such sanctions: their problem was a more fundamental one — detection was extremely difficult. Throughout the Reformation period there is an abundance of complaints about people being unwilling to denounce blasphemers. As a rule, neighbours, drinking companions, or colleagues did *not* report on blasphemers and were not fearful of the wrath of God. The fear of the far-away God was not as strong as the fear of being branded as an informer or even being violently attacked.²⁴ In many cases, people ignored blasphemous utterances more or less consciously. Many trial records mention profane oaths in passing that would have been punishable according to the law, but neither the listeners nor the authorities seem to have been interested in them. The Swabian humanist Heinrich Bebel (deceased 1518) illustrated the paradox of strict laws and lenient judicial practice in a particularly interesting narrative: When their prince was away, the council of a small town decided to strictly punish profane swearing. As the prince learned about this, he said “By Gods flesh, I do like that.” When the councillors looked at one another and laughed, the “prince declared by the heart and the body of God that he wanted to punish merciless anyone who swore without thinking that he soon and frequently did what he forbade his subjects to do.”²⁵

As Bebel’s story illustrates, it would be too easy to consider the different reactions to blasphemy — hysterical alarm versus the culture of laconic ignorance — as a form of “clash of cultures” within Christianity itself. Similarly, it is easy to paint it as a struggle of the pious elites against the religious ignorance of the common populace. In reality, even the behaviour of the elites was highly ambivalent. Christian preachers explained that blasphemous figures of speeches were played down as mere bad habits. Actually, they [the preachers]

23. Loetz, *Mit Gott handeln*, 180ff. Cf. other studies concerning sanctions against the *crimen blasphemiae* e.g., Susanna Burghartz, *Leib, Ehre und Gut. Delinquenz in Zürich Ende des 14. Jahrhunderts* (Zürich: Chronos, 1991), 134ff, 267ff; Peter Schuster, *Eine Stadt vor Gericht. Recht und Alltag im spätmittelalterlichen Konstanz*, Paderborn: Schöningh, 2000, 71ff; Schmidt, “Die Ächtung des Fluchens”; Gerd Schwerhoff, “Blasphemie vor den Schranken der städtischen Justiz. Basel, Köln und Nürnberg im Vergleich (14–17 Jh.)” *Ius Commune. Zeitschrift für Europäische Rechtsgeschichte* 25 (1998): 39–120, 64ff.

24. Schwerhoff, *Zungen*, 174.

25. Heinrich Bebel, *Schwänke*, ed. Albert Wesselski, 2 vols (München, and Leipzig: Müller, 1907), 51.

even provided helpful arguments exculpating the blasphemous sinners. A German law compendium of a certain brother Bertold of the fourteenth century declared that anyone who blasphemes and attacks the honour of God should die according to secular law, however, if he acted in wrath or without thinking, he committed only a pardonable sin. In this tradition, even early modern handbooks of the *cura animarum* such as that by the Trier suffragan bishop Petrus Binsfeld at the end of the 16th century classified blasphemy “ex lapsus lingue (by a slip of the tongue)” and without consideration of the “sensus verborum (meaning of the words)” as a minor offence.²⁶ Thus, it was logical that most blasphemers were let off without or only with mild punishment.

4. Competitive Culture and the Honour of God

In the present day debates blasphemy is regularly seen as an indicator for atheism and unbelief. Although many theologians in the late Middle Ages and early modern period would argue in the same direction, historical analysis yields different results. Only in rare cases did the strident prattle of the blasphemers really demonstrate a lack of faith. A man accused in 1516 by the Spanish Inquisition because of drastic profane swearing (“Dios non es nada!”) reacted with incomprehension and shock: Nobody could possibly claim that he abnegated the existence of God, as even the Jews and the pagans believed in God. His utterance must of course not be taken literally since it was simply an expression of anger.²⁷ Indeed, it does not make rational sense to insult or to challenge a God considered nonexistent by the individual. In that sense, we might even look at blasphemy as a confirmation of the fundamentally central role of religion in daily life. Of course, this confirmation did not take the pious form that contemporary theologians might have wished for or modern observers simply take for granted. Johann Huizinga wrote of the close relation between late medieval man and his God that led him into the danger of profanity.²⁸

As a matter of fact, the borderline between the sacred and the profane was not that clear in medieval and early modern Europe since God was often present in everyday conflicts. This does not mean that profane speech acts attacked him all, or most of the time. Rather, calling upon God or insulting God was a weapon used within the framework of a theatrical presentation of one’s own personality in order to attack potential adversaries in the context of very profane conflicts about honour. Blasphemy was often linked to other violent behaviour such as threats, insults, the drawing of knives, and physical violence. Together with the fact that blasphemers were predominately male, this proves that blasphemy was an integral part of a competitive masculine

26. Die “Rechtssumme” Bruder Bertholds. Eine deutsche abecedarische Bearbeitung der “Summa Confessorum” des Johannes von Freiburg, ed. Georg Steer, vol. 1 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1987), 508ff; Petrus Binsfeld, *Enchiridion Theologiae Pastoralis* (Trier, 1599), 238ff.

27. Maureen Flynn, “Blasphemy and the Play of Anger in Sixteenth-Century Spain”, *Past and Present* 149 (1995): 29–56, 41ff.

28. Johann Huizinga, *Herbst des Mittelalters. Studien über Lebens- und Geistesformen des 14. und 15. Jahrhunderts in Frankreich und den Niederlanden* (Stuttgart: Kröner, 1975), S.217.

culture.²⁹ Within the framework of the rituals of conflict blasphemy served to demonstrate power and independence, whilst actively calling on higher powers was a deeply ambivalent act. On the one hand, the blasphemer called for help in a manner akin to a conventional oath: his curses could be seen as cries for help to God and his helpers who were supposed to satisfy the speaker's wish for revenge. On the other hand, the blasphemer demonstrated virility and strength when he treated the higher powers with disrespect or even profanity. He provoked and he challenged scornfully; he claimed superiority over his human antagonist and similarly over God. Thus, he demonstrated to his opponents that he did not fear adversaries who were much more powerful than him.³⁰

According to the social and cultural context, the communicative code of blasphemy could take a number of forms. A nobleman might use profane swearing to confirm his sovereignty. A robber might use this to express his scorn for the ruling norms and his readiness to break any taboo. An analysis of playing cards, dice, and other forms of gambling where profane outbreaks were quite common reveals the manifold meanings of blasphemy. On the one hand, blasphemy here was essentially a threat to the other players. It accompanied and expressed the playful "struggle." On the other hand, blasphemy was a means to establish bonds between these players. It created a specific commonality among the players that separated them from their social environment. Blasphemy was thus a shared code that created the group since it integrated players that came from different social or regional backgrounds.³¹

Does this mean that blasphemy has no relevance for the history of religion? Was it merely a secular act? Certainly not, since within the framework of competitive communication the blasphemer insulted and injured God and his saints as if he was on equal footing with them. As a rule, that happened as a consequence of the verbal attacks that had been aimed at a human opponent; however, the creator himself was challenged often enough. For example, luckless players might direct curses and rude gestures against him in order to avenge themselves for their bad luck. A blasphemer might also complain about the death of a loved one or crop failure. In any case, it is significant that God and his helpers were challenged and insulted as one might challenge and insult human adversaries. As far as blasphemy in daily life was concerned, the theological definition of blasphemy as a profanation of God's honour was therefore central to the question. It is significant that all actors seem to have agreed on the central importance of that honour. The blasphemous attackers tried to insult the divine honour, whereas the

29. Rainer Walz, "Agonale Kommunikation im Dorf der Frühen Neuzeit," *Westfälische Forschungen* 42 (1992): 215–51.

30. Gerd Schwerhoff, "Starke Worte. Blasphemie als theatralische Inszenierung von Männlichkeit an der Wende vom Mittelalter zur Neuzeit," in *Hausväter, Priester, Kastraten. Zur Konstruktion von Männlichkeit in Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Martin Dinges (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 237–63.

31. Gerd Schwerhoff, "Der blasphemische Spieler — zur Deutung eines Verhaltenstypus im späten Mittelalter und in der frühen Neuzeit," *Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco* 1 (1995): 98–113.

authorities tried to defend it or to re-establish it. It is significant how often the courts, in doing so, answered the insult of God's honour with a retributive assault on the honour of the accused. They submitted them to the pillory and other shaming punishment or to shameful mutilations like cutting-out the tongue. Finally, even God himself was regarded as being connected to the worldly discourse of honour. Otherwise, how could insults provoke his wrath and thus lead to the dreaded collective punishments? Pious theologians and unruly blasphemers shared the anthropomorphic image of God that becomes visible here, even though the former condemned the arrogance of the latter. The honour of God was the central issue popular misbehaviour and learned norms had in common.³² Importantly, the creator seems to have been closer to the men of the fifteenth century than a member of the Prussian officer corps to a master artisan in the nineteenth century, as the officer considered a quarrel with the master artisan as below his dignity.³³

Here, the question whether blasphemy demonstrates a lack (or absence) of faith comes into play. Historians have discussed this issue without reaching a definite conclusion. In most cases, atheism was not the blasphemers' motive. If individuals entertained doubts about God's existence, it did not make sense to attack him. Thus, profane swearing might be regarded as a negative confession of faith. Of course, this does not mean that some "virtuoso" blasphemers like Thonis von Wesseling of Cologne mentioned above had not been condemned as unbelievers. Blasphemous speech acts demonstrate that premodern thought and action had more room to move between heaven and earth than was dreamt of in historical textbooks.³⁴

5. Changes and Continuities

In the late seventeenth century the triumph of the scientific revolution and of the Enlightenment began, that were to change men's attitude to religion fundamentally. The erosion of the traditional idea of blasphemy was part and parcel of this shift. In 1801, the law reformer Anselm von Feuerbach declared: "It is impossible to insult the deity. It is unthinkable that it will revenge its injured honour on men. It is foolish to assume that sanctions against the injuring party will reconcile the deity."³⁵ Since the nineteenth century, criminal law had only to protect the religious feelings of the members of the society and the public peace, and no longer the honour of the creator himself anymore. The conflicts that commenced as a result of this change that still exist today were revealed during the debate about the Islamic cartoons — pious believers against sceptical and sometimes derisive non-religious individuals.

32. Gerd Schwerhoff, "Blasphemare, dehonestare et maledicere Deum. Über die Verletzung der göttlichen Ehre im Spätmittelalter," in *Verletzte Ehre. Ehrkonflikte in Gesellschaften des Mittelalters und der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Klaus Schreiner and Gerd Schwerhoff (Köln: Böhlau, 1995), 252–78.

33. Cf. Ute Frevort, *Ehrenmänner: das Duell in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft* (München: Beck, 1991), 76ff.

34. Cf. Schwerhoff, "Die alltägliche Auferstehung," for a case study and for a different discussion of the connection of unbelief and blasphemy.

35. Siegfried Leutenbauer, *Das Delikt der Gotteslästerung in der bayerischen Gesetzgebung* (Köln and Wien: Böhlau, 1984), 242

Whereas blasphemy in the Old-European world had been a sign of strong religious bonds (even though not necessarily of godliness), it now became an indicator of a lack of faith and the loss of religion.

In the age of mass migration and globalisation blasphemy again became a dominant issue not within one's own religion any more but for the interface between one's own and other religions. The outrage about the caricatures in Muslim countries was caused not only by the fact that pictures of Muhammad had been produced against Islam's strict ban on images. Rather — as should be well-known by now — the outrage was made worse by faked images of Muhammad that showed him as a paedophile or as a sodomite. Such brutal profanities that attacked the personal honour of the God would have been condemned by Christian theologians of the Occident as typical expressions of blasphemy. That the whole of the Western world was blamed for the blasphemy of individuals was certainly extreme, but entirely in keeping with the Western logic of collective guilt according to which the actions of a few taint the whole community. This logic, however, remained pure theory in the Christian West. It took the specific conditions of the media-generated "clash of civilizations" to grant a belated triumph to this attitude.

We might want to ask whether there were or are parallels for this relaxed attitude towards the highest religious authorities in Muslim culture. Some things suggest that we might be looking at a specific Western tradition here that has no parallels in the Orient. In spite of all the close alliances between the church and the world, in spite of the norms of the authorities and religious taboos, the West never knew a complete identity of the religious. Nor could it know the worldly system that forced the individual to submit under its norms unconditionally and without any criticism. Thus, the culture of blasphemy in Old Europe may stand for some measure of freedom of thought and actions well before its supposed arrival with the age of the Enlightenment.